

This is What Democracy Looks Like

David Graeber

BY J.P. O'MALLEY

Before the arrival of the Occupy movement in the fall of 2011, anarchism had a serious image problem. Many Americans associated it with hooded youths smashing windows at McDonald's, causing riots in the process.

As a political philosophy, anarchism encompasses much more than this clichéd stereotype. It is essentially about giving the voting population the power to self-govern through egalitarian decision making, thus erasing systems of hierarchy. With his latest book, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement* (Spiegel & Grau, April), radical activist David Graeber could be seen as the accidental spokesman for the anarchist movement, expressing its ideas with the sophistication they deserve. His radical

heterodoxy challenges the conventional narrative dominating mainstream public discourse: that we are living in a rational society where hard work and fairness are justly rewarded.

While he may be a radical activist, Graeber describes himself as an "anarchist with a small *a*." By popularizing the phrase "we are the 99%," Graeber helped a small group of idealists with little support grow into a global political network that staged occupations in 800 cities in just a few weeks.

When Graeber is not organizing solidarity movements, he teaches anthropol-

ogy at the University of Goldsmiths in London, where we are drinking coffee in the staff canteen. Any other spare time he dedicates to writing.

Graeber was born in 1961 in New York City. Two years ago he became a key figure in the meetings that would lead to Occupy Wall Street: the anticapitalist protest movement that started on September 17, 2011, in Manhattan's privately owned Zuccotti Park and ended two months later—at least as a movement linked to that one physical location—when the NYPD began removing the occupiers by force.

But these details only make up a small portion of the book's subject matter. Graeber's main argument goes something like this: the American electorate currently doesn't live in a democratic society because America has never been a democracy. Although this might initially sound like a daft communist con-

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spiracy" theory, it starts to make sense when Graeber poses two fundamental questions: what is democracy? And what does the term "Western civilization" mean? By looking at key dates in American history, Graeber's book attempts to understand how the myth of democracy has firmly maintained political hegemony in the United States for the last two centuries.

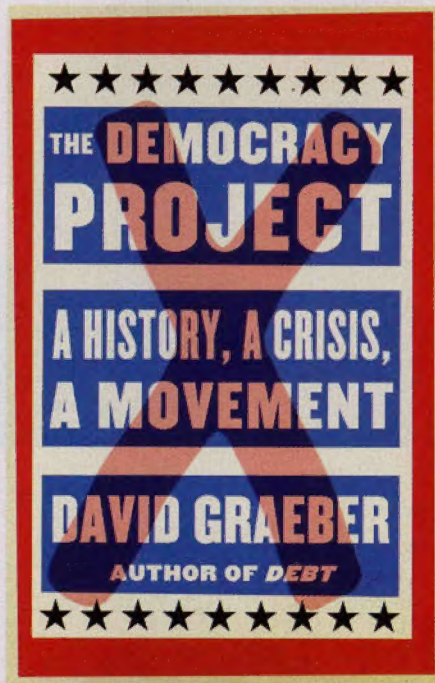
Graeber claims that neither the Declaration of Independence nor the American Constitution embody the democratic values they are supposed to represent. In fact, the model for the Constitution, he says, was an autocratic form of government: the Roman Republic. "[The Founding Fathers] were very unsentimental about what they were trying to do, which was to have a democratic element of government along with aristocratic and monarchical principals: where the president is a monarch, and the Senate is the aristocracy."

Graeber doesn't spend a lot of time—as many radical thinkers on the left do— lambasting the finance sector. His main concern is the fact that 1% of Americans have more money than they could ever spend, while the other 99% can barely afford to pay their mortgages or send their children to college. The key to understanding why the capitalist system operates in its present form, he argues, is analyzing how the elite—by which he means financial institutions and government, who are almost the same in his eyes—consolidate power by controlling the global money markets. In short, if you want to trace the trajectory of modern American capitalism, simply follow the money trail.

"If you look at history," Graeber says, "there seems to be a regular pattern: the country with the most powerful military also happens to be the one with the world trade currency. That gives them an enormous economic advantage, which causes goods to flow into their country. It's not as if everybody else is so stupid that they can't understand how America's financial instruments work, and then end up sending us their cars, computers, and raw

materials. America has the most powerful military in the history of humankind. That is not just a coincidence.

"In my previous book, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* [Melville House, 2011], I made an argument that there has been a systematic correlation between military systems and money creation. This has been going on since at least 600 B.C. It changes over different periods of time, but there is always a fundamental link between how money is created and war."



Graeber claims that in American culture—due to the way children are educated to think about what democracy actually means, and because the pundit and managerial classes espouse the word so much it has lost its meaning—most people with a right to vote have very limited political horizons. Democracy is an abstraction: something that no Americans have ever practiced or experienced, he adds.

Graeber says, "It is assumed in many parts of the world that democracy is a group of people facing a certain problem, who come together to solve it in a way where everyone has an equal say. It's true that most American citizens think of

themselves as living in a democratic country. But when was the last time that any Americans actually sat down and came to a collective decision? Maybe if they are ordering pizzas, but basically never."

To try and understand what it would be like to live in a free society, Graeber asks me to envision a world where decisions are not made by an autocratic government that gets elected every four years. Instead of the current system of a majority voting, decisions would be made collectively. This is called *consensus*. "This idea is—in a noncoercive way—a process of trying to create institutions that would work without having to bring in the guys who say, 'Shut up, do what you are told, or I will hit you.' If somebody feels there is a fundamental principal they disagree with it, they cannot be compelled to go along with that decision," he says.

Graeber believes it's imperative to recognize the mistakes of history if we are to become true democrats and fulfill our potential as human beings. Prior to the 1600s, he notes, "nobody wrote books asking, 'What will create the most wealth?' People before that had more noble concerns. Instead they asked, 'What are the conditions that will create the best people, or the best friends?' I believe as a society we have lost that."

A cynic might easily laugh off Graeber's proposals. The pessimist within me would say it's highly unlikely that his utopian vision will ever come to fruition. But his positive outlook on human progression is definitely something worth taking seriously. "Human culture is really about creating other human beings who we feel should exist. As a society I want to get back to that. The situation we are currently faced with has completely confused us as to why we are even here in the first place." ■

J.P. O'Malley is a freelance journalist based in London. His work has appeared in many publications including the Spectator, the Economist, the Daily Beast, New African, the American Interest, the Times of Israel, and many others.